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ABSTRACT

Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore (Maryland) is a school that is exemplary by virtue of its efforts to build on the strengths of students and the community. Although it is not yet a model of curriculum or instruction, it operates in an ethical and theoretical framework with much to say to the urban educator. The school, which serves about 500 African Americans students in prekindergarten through grade 5, is organized into three "academies," and each academy has a teacher-administrator team with the power to shape curriculum and instruction. Coleman is the first year-round school in Maryland and is further distinguished by its Parent Academy, which fosters parent participation. The guiding principles at Coleman are those of the Urban Learner Framework (ULF) of Research for Better Schools, Inc. The ULF asserts that urban learners are capable, that they bring with them many cultural strengths the schools must build on, and that they are resilient and able to profit from attention and culturally sensitive instruction. An evaluation of the ULF in practice at Coleman focused on 5 teachers and interviews with about 70 students. Results give insights into the culture of academic success that is being built at Coleman. (Contains 67 references.) (SLD)

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Academic Excellence, Cultural Relevance, Community Connectedness: Lessons from R. W. Coleman Elementary School

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Three barber chairs are lined up along one wall next to a cupboard with drawers labelled "boys underwear" "boys uniform pants" "girls blouses", "socks". On the counter above the drawers are eight computers and a printer. A group of African American women, late teens to middle age, are seated around a table putting together reading packets....

It's time for second grade art and Ms. W., a parent, pushes her cart of paints, markers, construction paper, brown paper bags, artificial hair, and other art supplies down the corridor and into a classroom....

Downstairs, in the gym, there's a buzz of 15 fifth grade girls clustered around tables and mats reading and discussing books with groups of four or five first graders. Posted on newsprint taped to the wall is the set of reading activities for the day. Carefully, the fifth graders record the progress of each of their first graders in the child's personal folder. Miles Davis is playing in the background....

Outside, a group of fifth graders is returning from their weekly Coppin State College science lab class....

In the main entrance is a display covering a 12 by 10 foot wall space. Large photos of children from the school are framed by the title, "A new vision of the urban learner....Culturally Different...Capable...Motivated...Resilient."

Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore, MD is a school in progress -- like many others urban schools. What makes it exemplary is, that by building on the strengths of students and community, Coleman demonstrates a foundation for creating personally and socially empowering educational experiences, especially for low-income children of color. Although it is not yet a model of reform in curriculum, instruction, assessment, organization or governance, educators concerned with re-visioning and reshaping schools, particularly in the urban context, can glean much from the ethical and theoretical framework implicit in daily life at Coleman.

Much has been said about the school failure of low-income children of color (see, for example, Jacob & Jordan, 1987; Oakes, 1975; Ogbu, 1974; 1978). Yet there are schools and classrooms in which these children experience multiple forms of success (see, for example, Apple & Beane, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994a). Understanding the conceptual frameworks and practices underlying exemplary schools can support educational improvement in other settings.

Moreover, *school success* has many meanings. Although success has traditionally been defined by standardized achievement tests, these measures are increasingly becoming obsolete as educators' search for alternative way to assess broader competencies, including students' ability to assess knowledge critically, to obtain and evaluate information from multiple sources, and to demonstrate their ability to use information and academic skills to solve problems in real-world contexts (Archbald & Newmann, 1988; Resnick, 1987; Sternberg, 1985). Even more broadly, parents, educators, and scholars of color in particular, argue for a multifaceted notion of excellence that includes cultural and social competencies that prepare students to be effective members of their communities and to contribute to productive social change (Ladson-Billings, 1994a).

The purpose of this paper is to describe a school which demonstrates multiple forms of *success* and to analyze the beliefs and practices underlying its success. The paper argues that several common and interconnected themes characterize the perspectives and practices of teachers, administrators, parents, and students. It also argues that these perspectives and practices constitute a foundation from which to engage in further educational change. This foundations is discussed as an important, and largely missing element, in discussions of school change, particularly in the context of urban schools serving low-income children of color.

Robert W. Coleman Elementary School

Coleman Elementary School serves about 500 pre-kindergarten through fifth grade African American students, about 86 percent of whom qualify for free/reduced meals. The professional staff is 80 percent African American and 20 percent white; all the administrators are African American as are all but two of the 20 classroom teachers. Coleman is organized into three academies or "campuses": the Primary Coleman Academy for pre-kindergarten and first grade, the Coleman Center Academy for second and third grade, and the Marshall/Mitchell

Academy for fourth and fifth grade. Each academy's teachers, along with specialists and parent educational assistants, are teams with the power to shape curriculum and instruction, develop programs, and organize the school day. Each teacher specializes in one of the four core subject areas (language arts, math, science, social studies). Children move from teacher to teacher throughout the day but are based with a home room teacher as in middle school. (The primary teachers elected to have children switch once a day, from language arts/social studies to math/science teacher.) With the exception of self-contained special education classes, all classes are single gender.

In August 1994, after teachers and administrators conducted research, visited other schools, and held discussions with parents, Coleman became the first year-round school in the state. Children attend nine week sessions followed by three week intersessions which offer a rich assortment of mini-courses in academic topics, the arts, and career introductions. All children attend one mini-session. Each mini-session accommodates about one-third of the school's enrollment with childcare provided for others not attending.

The school bustles with activity and cultural pride. Outside banners proclaim just a few: HOSTS -- Help Each Student To Succeed, a cross-age reading project; Fight Free School; Partnership with the Department of Energy; Parent Academy; Project 2000 (a mentoring program for African American males). Inside, hallways are decorated with photo exhibits and posters about these and other activities, awards, and commendations. There is a consistent presence of adult volunteers: parents, mentors from local businesses and public agencies, students from Coppin and Morgan State Colleges. African and African-American culture and history, are present throughout. Hallways are decorated with bulletin boards bordered with kente cloth designs, African proverbs and art; signs proclaiming African-centered values of

community and peoplehood, spirituality, respect for self and others, and effort. In some classrooms, bulletin boards with titles like "A place called home -- Africa" or "Hishima Watoto -- Children of Respect and Honor," celebrate Africa in pictures and proclaim its ethical heritage. Teachers in these classrooms integrate African heritage and values into daily activities, reminding children of the power of self-determination and asking them to "line up in the unity fashion." Even in classes where there is less overt African-centeredness, African American intellectuals, scientists, artists, and leaders are prominently displayed.

Coleman is located in the Coppin Heights section of West Baltimore, home to Coppin State, an historically Black college, and Frederick Douglas High School, Baltimore's historically distinguished African American High School. The two institutions are just two blocks from each other with Coleman positioned in between. Many Coleman teachers graduated from Douglas High School and Coppin or Morgan State University (an historically Black college). In the decades of the 1960's, '70's, and early '80's, Coppin Heights was a stable, working class and middle class African American community of small, neat brick homes and row houses. Like many other urban communities, it has born the assault of deindustrialization and accompanying economic and social crises over the last fifteen years. Today many homes are occupied by renters. Remaining home owners are mostly elderly people unable to afford the suburbs. Drugs, violence, and crime are serious problems. Two days before Christmas 1994 a ten year old Coleman student was shot on his front porch by another child while examining a loaded gun. Yet, teachers and administrators contend that the community's regard for education and mutual support persists in the face of social crises.

Like many low-income communities, economic and social crises are passed on to the school. And it is difficult to have a sustained impact on children because of student transience,[1] despite Coleman's attractiveness to out-of-district parents. Despite these challenges, when compared with nearby elementary schools serving children of similar backgrounds, Coleman students do very well on standardized achievement tests. For example, in 1992-93, on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Coleman first graders ranked first out of 21 schools in the district's Northern Baltimore City Area in reading; second graders ranked second out of 22 schools in math and reading, and fourth graders ranked fourth out of 22 schools in reading and fifth in math. Moreover, Coleman compares very favorably to elementary schools in Baltimore City as a whole. Citywide, Coleman first graders were fifth out of 116 schools in reading and sixth in math; second graders were third in math and reading out of 118 schools; and forth graders were twenty-first in reading and twenty-ninth in math out of 115 schools.

The school also has a high rate of student and faculty attendance. Student attendance was 90.9 percent in 1992-93, 93.7 in 1993-94, and 96.7 in 1994-95. Faculty attendance is also consistently high (95.2 percent in 1992-93, for example). In fall 1995, the school received an award for the highest student attendance in the Northern Baltimore City area.

However, Coleman staff are quick to point out their dissatisfaction with student performance when compared nationally. Coleman students continue to demonstrate low levels of achievement typical of urban schools serving low-income children of color. Here the goal of administrators and teachers is explicit: their students should be able to do as well or better than any children in the country on measures of achievement.

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[1] In 1992-1993, 13.4 percent of students were new entrants and 10.6 percent withdrew from Coleman (Baltimore City Public Schools, 1993).

Although the school will be judged by its scores on standardized achievement tests, and raising them is a priority, the staff is also cognizant that these tests measure a very limited range of what children know and are able to do. They are currently implementing performance based assessments to evaluate a wider range of skills and applications of knowledge. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in this paper, parents, teachers, and staff want more than quantifiable academic success. They want an education that will prepare Coleman students for the complex thinking required for work and citizenship in an information-based society. They want children to have a strong sense of their identity and the cultural and social competence to "give something back" to their community and to improve the broader society.

Conceptual Framework

This paper is rooted in three central concepts. First, research indicates that children's identity, culture, and social experiences are foundations for school learning (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). However, what occurs in schools tends to be most congruent with the dispositions and experiences of white, middle class children, e.g. focus on dominant cultural values, validation of dominant standard English, validation of mainstream experiences and knowledge, emphasis on linguistic and mathematical intelligences (Villegas, 1991). As a result, the cognitive, cultural, and experiential strengths poor children and children of color bring with them to school are more likely to be unrecognized or devalued than those of white, middle class students. In particular, social science research and a growing number of educational projects point to the importance of building on the home experiences (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), cultural identities (Irvine, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1990; 1994a), communicative patterns (Foster, 1992; Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981), native language (Moll & Diaz, 1987), and multiple abilities (Gardner, 1983; 1993) of low-income children and children of color. Underpinning both theory and practice is a growing recognition of these children as

capable (Baytops, 1992; Gardner, 1993), culturally rich (Villegas, 1991; Zeichner, 1993), motivated (MacLeod, 1991; Sylvester, 1994), and resilient (Winfield, 1991).

Although social science research has discredited conceptions of poor children and children of color as "disadvantaged", "culturally deprived", "at-risk" and otherwise deficient, Eurocentric, deficit models persist among teachers (Lipman, 1993) and pre-service teachers (Paine, 1989; Haberman, 1991; Zeichner, 1993). Without reframing these deficit notions and developing new shared meanings (Sirotnik, 1987) focused on the strengths of diverse cultures and multiple abilities, it is doubtful that reforms of curriculum and instruction and school organization can significantly benefit low-income children of color (Lipman, 1993). Thus, a new orientation toward the strengths of these children, their families, and communities is a necessary foundation for reshaping schools.

The Urban Education Project of Research for Better Schools has elaborated a conceptual framework which captures this shift from deficits to strengths. The Urban Learner Framework (Urban Education Project, 1994; Williams & Newcombe, 1994) synthesizes four central themes from the research: 1) cultural diversity and learning, 2) unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential, 3) enhancing ability development through motivation and effort, 4) resilience. "[T]aken together, [they] generate a vision of urban learners as culturally-diverse, capable, motivated, and resilient" (Urban Education Project, 1994). The Framework argues that these themes must inform educators' decision-making in areas of 1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment, 2) staff development, 3) school environment, 4) management and are fundamental in restructuring urban schools.

Second, the wisdom of practice (Shulman, 1987) of successful teachers of children of color must become part of the dialogue on educational reform (Delpit, 1988; Lipman, 1995; in press). Although there are many exemplary teachers of children of color, there has been little

information on their pedagogical knowledge and practice (Ladson-Billings, 1994b), and surprisingly few accounts of current reforms incorporate this knowledge base (King, 1991). Moreover, there is little attention to perspectives of families and communities of color in writings on educational reform. Yet these voices are crucial in developing a consensus about how to make schooling far more productive and empowering for children of color. As Delpit (1988: 296) argues:

> I am also suggesting that appropriate education for poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture. Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest....

This paper draws on an emerging literature on the liberatory pedagogy of successful teachers of African American children (Delpit, 1992; Foster, 1991; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994a). Ladson-Billings (1994a) describes the pedagogical excellence of these teachers as *culturally relevant teaching*. In contrast with "assimilationist" teaching which encourages children to fit in to the existing social order, culturally relevant teaching allows African American children to achieve academic excellence without giving up their cultural identity, helps them see their identity in national and global contexts, and helps them develop the intellectual and cultural tools to work for progressive social change (Giroux, 1988; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990). "These teachers aim to help students survive the educational system by making them co-creators of culturally affirming emancipatory learning experiences that oppose and transcend it" (King, 1991: 263).

A third conception undergirding this paper is that models that stretch the range of possibilities are central to change. Central Park East Secondary School in New York's East Harlem is a well-known example. The practice of educators Kay Toliver (Toliver, 1993) and Jaime Escalante (Escalante & Dirmann, 1990), and publications of the National Council of

Teachers of Mathematics (1991) reflect how models are being used in the reform of mathematics education. A recent issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (Ernst, Statzner, & Trueba, 1994) is an example of how new visions of schooling concretize the paradigm shift from failure to success in the eduction of minority students. Visiting exemplary schools has become a staple of national and local projects that involve educators in reform. Accounts of practice which builds on the knowledge and strengths of children and communities of color can provide examples for educators struggling with the day to day realities of teaching in the present context. (See, for example, King, 1991; MacLeod, 1991; Moll et al, 1992). An aim of this paper is to join the conversation about re-visioning education through a descriptive analysis of the practice of Coleman Elementary School.

The Study

In the summer of 1994, members of the staff of the Urban Education Project at Research for Better Schools initiated a collaboration with the principal, staff, and parents of Coleman. This collaboration was based on the principal's belief that the Urban Learner Framework of Research for Better Schools helped focus Coleman's direction, and the belief of RBS's Urban Education Staff that Coleman might help illustrate concretely what the Framework looks like in practice. Our collaboration had two goals: 1) to identify the school's strengths in order to inform other educators, and 2) to share what we learned with staff and parents to help them make their vision a reality. Our ethnographic study of the practice and ethos of Coleman began in July 1994. Sociologist, David Kinney and I visited the school twice during the summer, and spent three days a week there for five weeks in September and October 1994. We conducted open-ended interviews and conversations with teachers and administrators, professional and non-professional staff, parents, students, community people, volunteers, Project 2000 staff, and a college teacher and others who taught in the school's first intersession. Our questions focussed

on their educational goals, descriptions of their practice, what constitutes academic success, their assessments of student achievement of "success," and their interpretation of the Coleman vision. We also observed classes, school activities, meetings, the Coleman Parent Center, a class for Coleman students taught at a college campus, summer camp, intersession classes, and everyday life in the school, and we videotaped intersession activities.

In addition to school-wide investigations, using a modified "community nomination process" (Ladson-Billings, 1994a), we asked parents and administrators to identify seven teachers "who you believe reflect what Coleman is all about and the direction in which Coleman is moving." Of the eight top choices, we selected five who represented a range of grade levels, new teachers and veterans, at least one African American male teacher, and at least one white teacher. We also avoided a disproportion of teachers of students with special needs. We observed the five teachers' classes several times including one full day, interviewed them about their teaching and educational philosophy, had on-going informal conversations with them through-out the fall, and David Kinney interviewed about 70 students.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. We recorded observations in fieldnotes and viewed videotapes of school activities, conferences, events, media coverage of the school, and collected other archival data. Fieldnotes, interviews, and archival data were coded for substantive categories and analytic categories were derived from coded material. In December 1994, we met with staff and parents for two days to discuss our findings and their reactions. The data gathered during this time period provide initial insights and pose new questions. A deeper understanding would require more interviews and observations, a broader selection of teachers, and in-depth case studies of classrooms and students.

Foundational Ethos

The central themes of the Urban Learner Framework provide an comprehensive overview for examining schools in the urban context. They embody an ethos rooted in valuing and building upon the strengths of diverse urban students. More specifically, the critical and transformative practice of successful teachers of African American students described by Ladson-Billings (1994a) provides a useful lens for examining successful schools for African American children. Teachers in Ladson-Billings' study see themselves as part of a community and teaching as giving something back to the community. They believe all children can succeed and help students make connections between their community and national and global identities. Their classrooms are "humanely equitable" communities of learners, and they demonstrate "connectedness" with children and their families. These teachers help children construct their own knowledge, view knowledge critically, and prepare them to work for social change. Their conception of excellence takes into account student diversity and is rooted in African American intellectual and cultural excellence. This ethos is embodied in their teaching and their relationships with children, families, and community. A similar, powerful core of values and driving purpose seems central to the excellence of the Black Independent School, Providence St. Mel in Chicago (WTTW, 1994; Kathleen Healy, personal communication, January 1995) and in African-centered Black Independent Schools (Shujaa, 1994).

In the same vein, this paper indicates that Coleman's strengths are less rooted in specific curricula, pedagogies, and innovations than in an ethos that values children and their families, and that envisions schools at the center of rebuilding community. This ethos, or culture of the school (cf. Wehlage, Smith, & Lipman, 1992), is tangible in the character of day to day interactions of adults and children, in the spirit with which teachers and administrators interpret their work as a "calling" (Ladson-Billings, 1994a; Lipman, 1995), and in the school's

relationships with families and community. In the Coleman context, programs common to other schools (such as cross-age tutoring, organized parent involvement, mentors, and community activities located in the school), are redefined by a spirit of community building and collective responsibility for the next generation.

In this paper I suggest that the school's dispositions and values, coupled with the will and organizational capacity to forge vision into reality, provide lessons for other educators. The school's practice concretizes aspects of a conceptual framework based on student strengths and extends that framework to building on strengths of communities. As aspects of day-to-day practice, three intertwined and overlapping themes define the school's ethos: 1) a culture of academic success, 2) a sense of future, and 3) community connectedness and renewal.

Culture of Academic Success

The picture that emerges from observations of classrooms and interactions between students and adults throughout the school is one of children connected with school and eager to succeed. Doing well in school is valued, and children volunteer ideas and contributions beyond what is required. In most classes hands shoot up to answer questions and participate in classroom activities. Teachers consistently validate children's abilities, and children respond self-confidently often demonstrating competence through public performances. Young children introduce important guests to assemblies of the whole school, make public address announcements, greet visitors in the hallways, stand up and speak out in class. Illustrative of what we saw in other classes, are these fieldnotes of Mrs. D.'s first grade girls:

> Students are seated on the floor in a semi-circle around Ms. D. Ms. D. "...every day we are going to do mathematical problem solving." (A chorus of "Yeah!") "I'm going to make your brains tickle." (giggles) ...To each question nearly half the hands in the room are up, bouncing, straining to be called on. Each girl who is called on stands up to give her answer in a full sentence....Ms. D. to each girl: "Thank you very much. You're very smart" or "Isn't she smart?"....They sing and act out "Five little monkeys lying in the bed, one fell off and bumped his head...." Diane raises her hand. "Can I sing a song?" Yellow and red hair fasteners

> bobbing, she marches up to the front of the class, looks over the group and begins singing in a loud voice: "Five little men on a string trying to get to heaven. One fell off and he said ouch...." She seems to be improvising as she goes. It is all sung loudly and clearly with hand gestures and acted out, head tipped to the side....Ms. D.: "That's good!" She hugs Diana. The class applauds....

Instead of individualistic competitiveness, teachers begin with the message that all children are "smart" and encourage them to support each other, promoting academic success as both individual and collective (cf. Fordham, 1988). For example, in Ms. D's class at the beginning of the year, Andrea, a first grader, was withdrawn and did no work. Ms. D. told Andrea's table of five other girls that it was their job to help Andrea join the class. After nine weeks, Andrea is actively participating. From fieldnotes:

> Andrea is at the board, confused about minus and equal signs. She erases, looks at the board, erases again. For about six minutes Mrs. D. helps her work through it. The class watches quietly, some shake their heads when she puts up the wrong sign....Finally she gets the signs straight. Ms. D: "Great. I'm so proud of you." Andrea's whole table bursts into applause as she takes her seat. Ms. D. to the class, but looking mostly at Andrea's table: "She's a different little girl, isn't she? When Andrea came in she wouldn't do any work. Now she does all her work. We're so proud of her...I'm so proud of all my girls. I can see we're going to have a lot of fun doing math."

Mr. N., a fifth grade teacher, explains this philosophy:

> Being competitive is good, but being competitive to the point where you begin to isolate from those that are not as competitive, that's where it gets dangerous....I hold all of them responsible and I always remind them that because you're doing well, it's not right to sit there and let your other friends not do well when you can assist them....I'm trying to get that cohesiveness with them.

There is a tangible commitment to helping all children succeed. Repeatedly teachers said they measured their own success by the success of all the students. Ms. D.:

> I just want them all to learn all that they can and I want to do my share in getting them there....When I lose a couple or a few, it really bothers me, then I think, 'Hey, well you know that you can't carry everybody to heaven.' I think like that, but it hurts me to lose them.

After our report to the staff of our initial findings, although they were in general agreement, some staff asked us to investigate why some fourth and fifth grade boys are demonstrating disengagement with academics. Instead of complacency, there is evident concern that the school could do better because not all children are not doing well.

Connectedness: "A Family Thing"

A central theme in discussions of successful teachers of children of color is "connectedness" (Foster, 1991; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1991; Lipman, 1995). These teachers, as well as pre-service teachers of color (Murrell, 1991), see meaningful human relationships as essential to pedagogical excellence. At Coleman, manifestation of connectedness are pervasive, multifaceted, and interwoven into the fabric of classrooms and corridors. Ms. P, a second grade teacher, explains that family-style relationships are a means of helping children succeed academically:

> "I have, as they call it, a `homey' class. [For] everyone, it's a home. You have to feel comfortable. I feel when children feel comfortable they are able to learn. Once I can reach a comfort level and [support] your self-esteem, and get your attention, I can teach you anything."

Moreover, academic success is fostered within a context of care for children not just as learners, but as people. Teachers teach *children*, not *subjects*, taking responsibility for the development of their character and demonstrating concern for their well-being. They function as "othermothers" (Henry, 1992) and "otherfathers" -- extended parents. As Foster points out, "A parenting stance requires being concerned with the whole child, not just his academic growth," (1991: 279). Teachers' refer to their students as "my girls" and "my boys," and male teachers often call all the boys "son." In the classroom, personal guidance and academics are intertwined, and serious advice and high expectations for behavior and academic achievement are intermixed with playfulness, hugs, and pats on the shoulder.

Family metaphors resonated in the talk and practice of adults and children we interviewed. An administrator describes welcoming a new student: "I would hold her hand and bond with her...to bring her into the family." Children are told that when they graduate from Coleman they are expected to come back and tutor, to give something back to the "Coleman family." A parent describes her relationships with other parent volunteers: "They have become friends, like a family. We care. That's what it's all about, caring for each other and the children." Ms. R, a primary teacher: "This school is so full of hugs and nurturing. I love these students. These are my babies. It's like a big family. This is a family thing." Mr. N. tells all his fifth grade boys on the first day of class that he is adopting them until June 30th, the last day of school.

The sense of family also breaks down social distance and status distinctions between professionals and non-professionals, educators and parents, through a sense of common mission and individual competence. For example, in the Parents' Room:

> Ms. W. (a teacher) comes in to get something laminated. She's joking with two of the parents. Laughing, they pat each other on the back, referring to each other as Miss so-and-so. Ms. W. to me: "We work together because it's all for the children. There's no rank here."

Parents often seek out the principal for personal advice on parenting, health concerns, and life choices, but active parents also give the principal candid advice.

Much as in a family, in a context of high expectations for all, each child is treated as an individual. A frequent message is that all children are accepted, regardless of differences, avoiding the sorting out which is all too common in many schools. Mr. N. tells his fifth grade boys:

> I don't accept sloppy work. When you bring a paper to me, you are saying "this is the best I can do." Some of you don't write cursive yet. That's okay. I don't have a problem with that. If you don't print well, I don't have a problem with that. Because you are doing your best....See, I talk to you the way I talk to my

> own sons at home, because I know the level of work you do for me. I look at every boy individually.

Teachers also extend their responsibility for children's development beyond classroom and school walls. Mr. N. eats lunch with his boys three or four days a week although this is officially a free period for him. To expand their horizons, he arranges out of school experiences. One day he says he has arranged to take them all to a famous restaurant on the waterfront for lunch: "I'm going to take you to ride the light rail. Most of you have not had an opportunity to ride the light rail...." During intersession he invited a group of students to his home to learn about his business breeding African fish. At the end of the year they have a dinner with turkey, fried chicken, shrimp salad, and crab cakes because "It's important to sit down and have a dinner together. A real dinner." He tells them, "If I am out in my car and I see you doing something you're not supposed to do, I am going to stop my car and talk to you. You are my responsibility in school and out."

Teachers open themselves personally to children, sharing their own feelings of growing up, using their own experience as a basis from which to derive lessons and advice much as adults do in a family. This self-disclosure is enhanced by the opportunity intersession mini-courses provide for teachers to share their personal interests. Relationships also extend to families. Calling parents is standard practice for many teachers; parents are always welcome and move easily in and out of classrooms. Before, during, and after school there is a steady flow of parents, many pushing younger children in strollers, coming to help out, to observe a class or touch base with the principal, a teacher or other staff member.

This connectedness is affirmed by end-of-the-day rituals. Most teachers walk their classes to the door. Patting a child on the shoulder, playfully pulling another's hat over his eyes, hugging boys and girls alike, they have a word for each one: "Say hi to your mama now, hear?"

"Take care of that cold when you go home, son." "Don't forget about your homework, son." "You did a great job today in math Cary." This is also an opportunity for administrators to connect with students personally. The leadership team -- all African American women -- is beset by hugs, yells of "Hi, Miss Johnson," "Hi, Miss Graves" and urgent needs to talk, to confide.

Confidence, Effort, and Respect

Rather than the pessimism often exhibited in schools serving low-income children of color, educators' talk is imbued with confidence in students' abilities. Regardless of test scores or reading levels, a consistent theme in interviews and informal conversations is the conviction that "these students are very intelligent." Ability is also seen as modifiable and multifaceted (Lee, 1993; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Urban Education Project, 1994).

Children are assured that ability is not to be conflated with the acquisition of skills. Ms. P: "If you say, `That's wrong,' it's almost like you stabbed them with something. And wrong is `I can't. I can't.' No, no, no. You just don't know how yet. You can." Children are consistently given the messages that they have knowledge they don't even recognize. For example, Mr. N. is demonstrating his boys' ability to reason: "Can I mess with my boys for about 10 minutes? [Pointing to their heads] I'm going to go in there and start pulling stuff you didn't know you had."

We also saw evidence of educators proceeding from children's multiple strengths, rather than looking for weaknesses. When a boy did not want to do math, his teacher told him, "If you can play the electric piano like you did during intersession, you can do some math." Reviewing boys' evaluations of their Project 2000 summer camp experience, one of the two lead teachers noted a boy's statement, "I never will quit [in basketball]." She said,

> Now, this tells me a lot. This is a kid who is into sports, so I can get some reading from him through sports. [His reading level is low] This kid has

> something going for him, his determination not to quit. We can reach this kid. This is a kid we might put on the basketball team too.

Teachers and some parents have participated in staff development offered through the Efficacy Institute, which stresses development of capacities through effort and high expectations. During our observations, this orientation was reinforced through professional development sessions and conversations among faculty and active parents. To students, achievement was explicitly related to determination and effort. Fieldnotes from Mr. N's class:

> Mr. N.: "Some people think that people who get the answers quickly, they think they are more intelligent. But that is not true." He goes on to tell them that he [currently a doctoral student] "has always been slow, but that has nothing to do with intelligence....You may not be where you want to be right now, but that's not your fault. If you work, you can get there because you're intelligent." [The boys' attention is riveted, faces serious throughout this talk.]

For at least some of the staff, this philosophy is interpreted as Afrocentric. A teacher explained that "cooperation is nothing new. It's part of the original values of Africa before slavery. Efficacy is nothing new. The truth about our culture needs to come out."

High academic expectations and confidence in students are ethical constructs reflected in a climate of mutual respect. Rather than infantalizing children, some of whom shoulder adult responsibilities at home, children are given responsibility and, in turn, are surrounded by adult guides who take personal responsibility for them. There are no hall passes, no bathroom passes. Children care for the school's fish tanks, answer telephones and work in the office, give visitors tours of the school. And confidence is demonstrated by giving children leadership roles. In Ms. P's third grade class, each table has a rotating leader responsible for her/his group getting all assignments, staying on task, and behaving appropriately. Problems are to be resolved by the group with leader as facilitator. At the end of the day, Ms. P. meets with leaders to review the day and discuss problems. Sometimes problems are referred to a conference led by the table leader the next day.

Culturally Relevant Conceptions of Excellence

African American-centered aspects of curriculum and school environment foster culturally relevant notions of academic success. Everywhere they turn, African American children see themselves in images of African and African American excellence, African wisdom and proverbs, and celebrations of the achievements of their classmates. They are also surrounded by a diverse set of adult African American models of excellence: parents, teachers, administrators, community volunteers and mentors. Not only can students see that they can achieve academic excellence without giving up their cultural identity, their culture is equated with definitions of excellence.

Implicit in efforts to foster a sense of collective responsibility, personal confidence, cultural pride, and all-rounded development is a broader, emancipatory, notion of education for African American children to be relevant members of their community (King, 1991) and to prepare them for active, critical democratic citizenship (Giroux, 1988). Adult role models are identified by individual achievements **and** commitment to the community. Children experience "giving something back" through HOSTS, a cross-age reading project in which older children hold themselves responsible for helping younger children learn to read. When children graduate, they are urged to return as mentors and tutors for younger children. We observed teachers reprimand students who finished quickly for applauding themselves rather than helping others.

Trust and Legitimacy -- The Core of a Culture of Academic Success

Erickson (1987) argues that trust and legitimacy are central in learning:

> Assent to the exercise of authority [in classrooms] involves trust that its exercise will be benign. This involves a leap of faith -- trust in the legitimacy of the authority and in the good intentions of those exercising it, trust that one's own identity will be maintained positively in relation to the authority, and trust that one's own interests will be advanced by compliance with the exercise of authority....The institutional legitimacy of the school is affirmed existentially as

> trust in face-to-face encounters between school staff and students and their parents. (pp. 344-345).

He goes on to contend that children make a choice, often very early in their schooling, and some choose to fail because to enter the teacher's world is too risky (see also McDermott, 1974). In the politics of every day life in school, to protect their sense of self they create alternative worlds in the classroom, worlds of disruption and resistance where they can succeed on their own terms.

This process is particularly salient for children of marginalized social groups whose culture, language, communicative and social interaction patterns may be denigrated and for whom socially constructed racial identities foster low expectations (See McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1979; Grant, 1985; Rist 1970 for example.) King (1991) argues that educational reform fails to address this central factor of African American students' cultural and political subordination and consequent alienation from school. It is my conclusion that care and concern for children, connectedness, demonstrations of confidence and mutual respect, and cultural relevance are keys to creating trust between adults and children at Coleman. The school's legitimacy as an institution is rooted also in its inclusiveness. As one teacher said, her goal is for every child to feel, "I'm OK and someone accepts me because I'm me." Evidence of trust and legitimacy are found in children's willingness to participate in learning and eagerness to demonstrate their knowledge, in their desire to maintain their teachers' approval, and in their displays of effort.

Creating a Sense of Future

Recently researchers and policy makers have argued that resilience is key to children overcoming destructive and debilitating social conditions beyond their control (Benard, 1991, Rutter, 1987; Winfield, 1991. A central aspect of resilience is children developing a sense that

they have a meaningful future (Benard, 1991, Winfield, 1991). At Coleman, a central aspect of a sense of future is the concrete possibility of attending college. From first grade, college experiences are an integral part of student life. First graders walk to Coppin State College once a week for physical education classes taught by Coppin State students. Their teacher says, "I point out students to them and how they are walking and how they are sitting and studying, and they feel big--`You're in college now. You're on the campus. You are college students.'" Fifth graders spend a quarter working with college faculty at Baltimore City Community College (BCCC) where they have a laboratory introduction to microbiology, chemistry, physics, and botany. There also are opportunities for students to tour Morgan State engineering and computer science labs and talk with professors there and to meet a famous African American brain surgeon at Johns Hopkins University. Through Project 2000, at Morgan State University, and a partnership with Coppin State's Teacher Education program, children have opportunities to build relationships with the many college students who mentor, tutor, and practice-teach at the school. Even registration for Coleman's first intersession was organized like a college registration process with course descriptions and registration tables set up in the gym. Several third graders found their first choices were filled. With disappointment, they acknowledged that, "It's just like college. You have to make your second choice."

One intersession class was offered by faculty of the science department of BCCC. Each day a group of nine girls made the trip by van to the nearby campus to study birds with a BCCC faculty member. These girls will return to the campus every three weeks through January to continue their studies. Excerpts from fieldnotes:

> The halls are packed with college students, among them a clump of third through fifth graders in their gray or blue uniforms. They're chattering as they wait to get into the ornithology lab....a tall girl says, "College is nice. We do just like the college students. We work in labs and everything"...It's a balmy October day, and their instructor takes them outside to record observations of birds and the trees they inhabit....The girls say they took the same quiz given to college

students and they all got A's. One girl: "I studied all weekend for it." I did too." (another girl).

They debate which college to attend: "When I go to college I'm going to Coppin." "I'm going to Morgan." "You can go to the University of Maryland too," another adds. Through this and other experiences college may be seen as a natural outgrowth of elementary, junior and senior high school. The viability of this goal is also reinforced by a parent-run Parent Action Fund which was initiated by the principal in response to a sense of hopelessness in the community. Each participating parent invests $50 a year, and the money is pooled in a mutual fund for Coleman students' future education. Upon high school graduation, each child whose parent contributed annually will receive a check for college (potentially $5000, depending on rates of return). Parents can never get the money back because, as the principal explained, "it's a village thing, a community thing."

There is a sense among children that they attend an "important school" (as a fifth grader put it). The omnipresence of awards and photos of city leaders is a daily reminder of the public recognition the school has received. Recently, the principal received a statewide Martin Luther King award, and the school has been featured on local and national television. This public presence and recognition validate children's worth and their place in the world beyond their neighborhood.

Conveying a sense of agency and responsibility for the future was also part of everyday life in the classrooms we observed. For example, Ms. W.'s fourth and fifth grade girls are discussing the sniper attack on President Clinton and the climate of violence in the U.S. Ms. W. tells them they need to think about these issues because as adults they will be the public decision-makers. Ms. W.:

> Is that the way to solve problems girls? No. You will be our future. We've got to change the philosophy of our world. If we don't get things together girls (voice

goes up, shaking her head suggesting dire consequences). It will be up to you to get it together, girls.

Teachers also convey the belief that their students, specifically, will affect their own futures. For example, one teacher tells her class to study hard because, "I may be sick someday and I may go to the emergency room. I may need a doctor, and you may be it...When we get old our lives will be in your hands." Moreover, through programs like HOSTS, a sense of individual future is tied to social responsibility.

Reconnecting and Renewing Community

Through connectedness with families, the immediate community, and the city, Coleman gives concrete substance to the African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Because of distances of race, class, nationality, or language, and because of their own negative experiences as students, schools are often alien territory for low-income parents and parents of color (Lareau, 1989; Lightfoot, 1978). Educators may also feel estranged from and even fearful of their students' families and communities. In this dynamic, each side loses the special knowledge of the other, which together, in dialogue, might nurture the child's development. In particular, lack of knowledge about children's home world limits educators' ability to build on their culture, experiences, and knowledge (Moll et al, 1992). In contrast, Coleman might be thought of as a circle interlocking with many other circles comprised of parents and guardians, mentors and volunteers, community-based projects and resources, city resources, local colleges, and so on. Each of these circles is focussed on the children, but in the dynamics of their involvement with the school each is strengthened.

School/Community Renewal

Compared with many urban schools, Coleman is resource-rich. Banners hanging outside the front doors proclaim a few of the 14 partnerships and 34 programs and activities which are

evidence of the initiative and entrepreneurship of the principal and staff. The extent of the school's relationships with community resources was demonstrated during the first intersession when outside organizations, institutions, and individuals competed to offer over half of the 24 mini-courses. Courses ranged from *French Pastry* taught by a pastry chef, *Careers in Hotels* led by a community member with a master's degree in hotel management, *Black Memorabilia* taught by a group which teaches African American history through displays of African American memorabilia, and elementary art taught by a parent.

In a period of shrinking resources, more responsibilities, and educational reform, it is increasingly common for schools to seek outside resources to enrich curriculum, provide funds and equipment, or supplement the staff. What is less common, is mutually beneficial relationships. What is fresh about Coleman's relationships with parents and community is that they are reciprocal -- community and parents contribute to the school but the school is also a vehicle for the development of those who contribute.

This orientation permeates most of the school's relationships with outside organizations and individuals. For example, a City League men's basketball team uses the school gym for practice. In return they organize and coach a school team, help pay for the Coleman team's uniforms, and function as an informal security squad for school staff working at the school after hours. Without this arrangement neither team might exist. Another example is Coleman's partnership with Coppin State College in which education students learn through classroom observations and participation at Coleman, and, in turn, mentor Coleman students. The partnership also allows Coleman students to take classes at Coppin State and use physical education facilities. A third example is the process for developing the first intersession classes. Prospective instructors, including parents and teachers, were required to write a formal proposal with support from the coordinator. The result was Coleman had high quality, well-

planned courses, and teachers, parents and community members got experience and training in proposal writing. All of these examples reinforce an ethos of community building and responsibility for raising the next generation.

The Parent Academy

The Parent Academy is a particularly striking example of this orientation. For a group of regular parent volunteers, the Academy has become a vehicle for connecting them with the school, for fostering closeness and mutual support among themselves, and for nurturing their own growth. Located in a large room at the end of the second floor hallway, the Parent Academy is the home-base and center of operations for parents and grandparents. The Academy is complete with a sink, refrigerator, first aid center, couches, washer and dryer, tables, computers, and equipment for laminating and mimeographing, and barber chairs. On average about 20 parents are there each day; some bring their infants and toddlers with them.

The glue holding the Academy together is Ms. V, the school's parent liaison. Ms. V. inducts new parents into the Academy and coordinates all the parent volunteers. She is herself a sort of mother for the younger mothers who call her "mom," advising them on parenting, personal relationships, and life choices. She encourages each volunteer to symbolically "adopt" at least one student to mentor regularly. Mrs. V. has herself adopted 15 children. Last year, Ms. V. was gravely ill. When she was finally released from the hospital, she insisted on going immediately to the school to "get back to my parents." The principal had a hospital cot installed in the Academy so Ms. V. could rest yet continue her work.

Parents say the Academy has been a means to develop new skills and self-confidence. The parent who gave us our first tour of Coleman described herself as "very shy" before she began working at the school, but now she "feels great. It has built my confidence up. It's been rewarding." Graduates of the Academy are schooled in 17 competencies (ranging from tutoring

to supervising the lunchroom to developing classroom materials) through apprenticing with other, skilled parents. As a result, parent volunteers have become competent, essential members of the school, performing valuable functions which would otherwise require additional resources and staff. Several parents are Educational Assistants for specific teachers, bringing their infants or toddlers with them every day. Others supervise the cafeteria, and substitute in the classroom while teachers attend meetings; for this they are paid a stipend. Several parents developed classes for the first intersession.

Coleman administrators seek out parents' talents and nurture them. When the school was without an art teacher this fall, a parent who loves art took over. Parents are sent regularly to educational workshops and then report back to the staff. A mother of four at the school volunteers every day, all day. In addition to the usual classroom support, she takes on significant professional responsibilities. Recently she was asked by the principal to serve as coordinator of a school nutrition education program and function as formal liaison with the outside organization providing the program. She also coordinates Coleman's partnership with a local hospital and conducts tours for visitors. As a result of Parent Academy instruction and other workshops, parents are able to participate in grade level teams, the School Improvement Team, and play authentic roles in the school.

As a consequence, parents have gained confidence, new skills, and developed their own strengths. A number of parents parlayed skills they developed through the Academy into secretarial jobs or jobs with the Board of Education, and several parents we interviewed said they plan to pursue careers in teaching. Thus parent involvement becomes a pathway to develop individuals and strengthen families.

School as a Center for Community Renewal

The character of school/family/community relations reflected in these examples prefigures the principal's larger, long range vision of reconnecting schools, families, and community. In this vision, there would be one principal for three feeder schools so that educational programs could be coordinated and educators connected throughout a child's schooling. "By the time these students reach twelfth grade and are ready to graduate, they would have been nurtured by all the teachers who have known them all the way" (Addie Johnson, personal communication, October 26, 1994). Together the feeder schools would house comprehensive health, child care, and social services for children and their families thereby increasing access and the quality of services. The principal terms this model "A Conspiracy of Care." Both teachers and services would follow children and their families through 12 years of schooling, In addition to health and social services, the school would be a center for adult education, family recreation, community activities and meetings.

Fundamentally, she envisions the school in a larger social context. As she wrote in her initial contact with us, "I have a vision for the community." In this vision, her role and the role of the school is socially transformative, embodied in her goal: "pursuit of happiness, not just for one but for everyone. That's how we live." One aspect is that the school is a site for community revitalization--providing resources, concentrating resources, and developing community resources (cf. Wilensky & Kline, 1988).

Role of Leadership and Organizational Structure

A discussion of leadership and organization is beyond the scope of this paper. However, some broad features help explain Coleman's strengths and its potential. First, the school is propelled by a leader in collaboration with administrators, teachers, and parents who share her goal of an empowering education for African American children and her belief in their

potential. Second, the principal and others consistently push boundaries and take initiative. The results are apparent in the school's many partnerships and new projects and directions such as year-round schooling, single gender classes, and academies within the school. Third, the principal has a broader vision of the school as a driving force for community connection, renewal, and development.

Her leadership is facilitated by an organizational structure characterized by a solid and committed core of leaders, decentralization through the Academies run collaboratively by teachers, support for teacher initiative and risk-taking, and authentic participation of parents. In addition to the principal there are three other members of the leadership team (the Assistant Principal and two lead teachers) who can run the school on a daily basis, lead staff development, mentor teachers, make public presentations, and develop new projects. This structure allows the principal to pursue broad goals as well as provide hands on leadership within the school. In addition, the school gives full play to the talents and skills of community people and parents, amplifying its resources.

Challenges and Questions

Our work with Coleman Elementary School has generated new questions and challenged some assumptions. Our work at Coleman has raised provacative questions for further research, questions of gresat concern to the Coleman community as well. We want to understand more deeply the relationship between a supportive school culture and academic achievement. We share a concern of some teachers that academic engagement tends to diminish among some fourth and fifth grade males. This is a concern that is reinforced by the school's achievement data. We wonder if there is a connection between these students' apparent academic disengagement and the existing curriculum. Is it related to peer pressure against academic success as Fordham & Ogbu (1986) have suggested, and how does one account for this process

in a context which models African American academic excellence? We wonder about the consequences of single gender classes. Most of all, we are concerned about what happens to children after they leave Coleman. (It is to this issue that the principal directs a proposal to connect Coleman with its middle and high school feeder schools under one centralized leadership and vision.)

In addition, the staff has identified challenges: addressing the persistent reality of families in economic and social crisis, raising academic achievement on a par with the best suburban schools, sustaining the academic commitment of older children -- particularly fifth grade males, implementing performance based assessments, inquiry-based learning, and facilitative instruction. Plans are underway to develop curricula on theories of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983; 1993). And there is the principal's long range goal of turning the vision of community connection and revitalization into a reality.

As it progresses, Coleman's strength is that it approaches these challenges from the strength of an underlying ethos. Belief in the strengths and potential of low-income children and families of color is concrete and programmatic. The school's practice is grounded in caring and respectful relationships with children and families, in a culture of academic excellence that acknowledges multiple strengths and the role of effort in achievement, and in a sense of future.

As staff and parents pursue new ways to help children acquire the intellectual tools and social support they will need, they stand on this foundation. I want to argue that without such a grounding we should be skeptical that current educational reforms such as new curriculum frameworks, authentic assessment, intensive professional development, and organizational changes will make schooling fundamentally better for children who are currently marginalized, negatively labelled, and alienated in school and in society. Growing out of the practice and ideology of committed and far-sighted African American educators, parents, and community

partners, the school demonstrates a grounding which may be essential to reforms that truly benefit those whom our schools have most failed.

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